

Facing the challenge



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These texts look at different kinds of challenges, from taking part in extreme sports to experiences that change the way people think. They also explore how facing a challenge can inspire people.

In this article, Louise Rogers tries to understand why young people are attracted to extreme sports.

To the limit?

You can now go deep sea diving without oxygen and do parachute jumping from space. These activities are apparently some of the latest examples of extreme sports. They certainly sound extremely dangerous, and it's tempting to call them extremely stupid too. You begin to wonder what people will do next: white water rafting without the raft? Skateboarding down Everest?

What exactly are extreme sports anyway? According to sports expert Angie Naidoo, they are action sports usually done by someone on their own rather than in a team. 'Extreme sports involve more than one of the following: speed, height, danger or spectacular stunts,' explains Angie. 'They are also often about challenging some aspect of the natural world, whether it's defying gravity or scaling a very high mountain. They are not all as extreme as parachuting from space! And extreme sports are not just a recent trend either: skiing, skateboarding, in-line skating and mountain biking are all examples of extreme sports that people have done for years.'



Moreover, these sports are becoming more and more popular, especially among teenagers. In fact, there is so much demand for facilities for such sports that plans are underway to build the world's very first indoor extreme sports centre in Manchester, at a staggering cost of more than £60 million. This high-tech, futuristic project will offer more than 20 intoxicating adventure sports. According to the company behind the project, the centre will include 'the largest ice-climbing wall in the world, a breathtaking surfing zone, and the ultimate artificial fast-flowing river for white water rafting.'





What is the appeal of these activities for young people? Joe Bellini, aged 14, thinks that one of the attractions of extreme sports is that there are no rules and you can create your own challenges. 'I really enjoy trying new jumps on my skateboard, and when you get a trick right, it's fantastic – you feel you can do anything!' For Kay Scipio, 15, it's surfing which has caught her imagination: 'I've only seen it on TV – but it's one of my dreams to skim the tops of the waves on a surfboard, poised like a dancer, and glide smoothly onto a sandy beach ...'



Malcolm Davies, a leader at an outdoor centre, comments: 'Things can seem a bit tame for kids these days, so it's important for them to have physical challenges and push themselves to the limit. It gives people confidence, and that can change their lives.' Mary Bellini, mother of Joe, agrees, though she worries about injuries and thinks there are plenty of other challenges in life as well as physical ones. 'Still, I'd rather Joe was out there doing something he enjoys, that gives him a sense of freedom and a sense of achievement, rather than sitting around at home in front of the TV.'

So, extreme sports offer people a challenge, the opportunity to develop skills, control nature and take risks, as well as an adrenalin-fuelled thrill. I am beginning to see some attraction in these sports, especially for young people. But I still think deep sea diving without oxygen is just plain daft.

In Mountains of the Mind, Robert Macfarlane gives an account of his adventures in the mountains. In this extract, he sums up why he finds mountains challenging and inspiring.

Beyond the mountain

Why are millions of people drawn to mountains every year? Perhaps it is because mountains challenge our belief that the world has been made for humans by humans. Mountains remind us that there are places which do not respond to the flick of a switch or the push of a button, as I discovered one day in late January.

Three friends and I went climbing on a mountain near Loch Laggan in Scotland. The day began magnificently. Clouds sailed in the sky, racing across the blueness. The sunshine was hard and bright, the whiteness of the snow reflected by its light. The forbidding cliffs of the mountain were dense with ice, which flashed and glittered in the sunlight. Despite the coldness of the air, I could feel the blood pulsing warmly in my toes as we ‘roped up’ ready to climb.

We began to ascend one of the east-facing ridges of the mountain. As we climbed, the weather changed its mood. The clouds thickened and slowed in the sky. The light changed from silver to dirty grey. After an hour of climbing, it began to snow heavily. Approaching the top of the mountain, we were in near white-out conditions: the snow was falling so heavily that it was difficult to separate the air and the land. It had also become much colder. My gloves had become frozen shells, which clunked hollowly when I knocked them together.

A few hundred yards from the summit, the ridge flattened out and we were able to unrope safely. The others stopped for something to eat but I moved on ahead, wanting to enjoy the solitude of being lost in the snow. Millions of particles of snow dust streamed just above the ground in a continuous flow. Rounded chunks of old hard snow skidded over the surface of the ridge. And the big soft flakes which were falling from the sky were being driven into me by the wind. They walloped almost soundlessly against my clothing and I built up a thin fur of snow on one side of me. It seemed as though I were wading in a loose white river. I could see no more than a few metres in any direction, and felt utterly and excitingly alone. The world beyond the whirling snow became unimportant, almost unimaginable. I could have been the last person on the planet.

After several minutes' walking, I stopped. A few paces away, sitting and watching me, resting on its huge hind legs, its tall ears twitching, was a snow hare. It seemed curious at seeing me on its territory, but not alarmed. The hare was gleaming white all over except for its black tail, a small patch of grey on its chest and the two black rims of its ears. For half a minute we stood there in the strange silence of the snow storm: me with my thin layer of fur and the hare with its magnificent white coat and polished black eyes. Suddenly, the hare kicked away and zigzagged off into the blizzard, its black tail bobbing long after its body disappeared.

Crossing paths with the snow hare reminded me that it had its own path too, as much as I had mine. I was also reminded that the true blessing of mountains is *not* that they provide us with a physical challenge, something to be conquered and controlled. It is much more than this. Mountains encourage us to recognise what is marvellous, unchanging and inspiring in the world, while also making us aware of our own unimportance. I thought of the snow falling across range after range of invisible hills, and I thought that there was nowhere at that moment I would rather be.



In 1988, Jesse Jackson failed in his second attempt to stand for election as president of the United States of America. In this speech, he urges his supporters not to give up when they are faced with defeat and to be inspired by the story of his own life.

Keep hope alive!



Wherever you are tonight, I challenge you to hope and to dream. You must never stop dreaming. Face reality, yes. But don't accept things the way they are: dream of things as they ought to be. Face pain, but love, hope, faith, and dreams will help you to rise above the pain.

Use hope and imagination as weapons of survival and progress, and keep on dreaming.

Dream of peace. Dream of teachers who teach for life and not for a living. Dream of doctors who are more concerned about public health than private wealth. Dream of lawyers more concerned about justice than being a judge.

We must never surrender to hunger. We must never surrender to illiteracy. We must never surrender to injustice. Don't surrender and don't give up.

Why can I challenge you this way?

'Jesse Jackson, you don't understand,' you say to me. 'I see you on television with important people. You don't understand my situation.'

I do understand.

You're seeing me on TV, but you don't know the me that makes me me.

I have a story. I wasn't always on television. Journalists were not always outside my door. When I was born late one October afternoon in Greenville, South Carolina, no journalists asked my mother her name. Nobody chose to write down her address.

I understand. I know abandonment and people being mean to you, and saying you're nothing and nobody, and can never be anything. I understand when nobody knows your name. I understand when you have no name. I understand.

I understand work. I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I had a shovel programmed for my hand. I was born in the slum, but the slum wasn't born in me.

Wherever you are tonight, you too can make it. Hold your head up high. You can make it. Don't you surrender. You must not surrender.

Keep hope alive ... keep hope alive ... keep hope alive! Tonight, tomorrow night and beyond, keep hope alive!

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